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## Vanity Press and Other Scams That Make You Feel Cool

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## PERSPECTIVES

## Vanity Press and Other Scams That Make You Feel Cool

*No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.*

Samuel Johnson

**Scenario #1.** I am strolling downtown and pass a gallery showing an artist whom I do not know. I notice a book about his paintings is also on display. The book turns out to be quite impressive and makes me wonder why I never heard of this presumably well-known artist before. Answer: vanity press. That is, the artist himself published the book to give the impression of fame to sell his paintings at an expensive price. Galleries that encourage this behavior are called “vanity galleries” and charge artists to exhibit their works.

**Scenario #2.** I am a novelist, but no one will publish my book. For a few thousand dollars, a vanity publisher prints a few hundred copies with the provision that I buy a specified amount. The publisher hires “reviewers” to say nice things about my book in newspapers, magazines, and blogs and places advertisements in specialized magazines and the *New York Times Book Review*. All of this makes me a “published novelist.” I will probably eventually end up selling my inventory from the trunk of my car, at flea markets, or at book fairs, but the publisher made its profit upfront. In *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *N’espérez pas vous débarrasser des livres*, the famous semiologist and author, Umberto Eco, describes an even more devious scenario. A respectable publishing outfit is owned by a vanity press. Most authors are rejected only to be referred to the vanity part of the company, which is the one actually making the money.

**Scenario #3.** I am a professional, good at what I do, but not particularly well known. One day I receive a letter from a publication called *World’s Greatest Professionals* saying: “Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you that based upon a review of executive and professional directories, associations, and journals, we believe your background makes you a fitting addition to our publication. There is no fee or obligation to have your profile listed.” I accept the invitation and once my name is published along with other individuals (some truly famous), I receive an offer to buy the book. Proud of myself, I go ahead and order several copies for my family, friends, and clients. How did I suddenly become “famous”? The answer again: vanity press.

This last scenario is very familiar to physicians who receive frequent e-mail messages and/or letters stating they have been selected for listing in a particular *Who’s Who* book. Some will include you for free, while others require advance payment. Once your name appears in the book, you will be offered framed certificates, wall plaques, medals, and even a press release! Such companies pray on one’s ego and vanity (thus they are called vanity media). These strictly for-profit companies have 1 objective: making money. I mention this because during interview season, I noticed several resident and fellow candidates who listed this type of “honor” on their resumé. Candidates need to know the implications of these books before making them a part of their curriculum vitae. One of these

companies goes so far as having a book called *Who’s Who Among American High School Students!* Your name listed there may impress your grandmother, but it will not help get you into a good college.

Close to where I live, one finds the American Biographical Institute (ABI) in Raleigh, North Carolina. This company has been operating since 1976.<sup>1</sup> The ABI offers the chance to be listed in their directories for a price. Once “invited” to join, you write your own biography and submit a picture. You can even propose that your own name be added by filling out a simple form on their Web site. The ABI publishes some grandiose-sounding titles such as *500 Great Leaders* and *Great Minds of the 21st Century*. The last contains the biographies of 2500 individuals. ABI’s books are said to be overseen by a Board of Advisors comprising 18,000 members! People have been known to pay to be listed there and then buy the book, only to donate it to their academic libraries in the spirit of self-promotion.<sup>2</sup>

Better known to those in medicine are publications from the Cambridge or Marquis *Who’s Who* companies.<sup>3,4</sup> They publish titles with names such as *Who’s Who in Medicine and Healthcare* and have on-line data bases offering similar information. To submit a biography, you need to be an invited “VIP” (which I imagine stands for very important person or very important physician). All of their products, including on-line services, are for sale. They sell a large amount of memorabilia that can be personalized with your name via an on-line catalogue order. Another vanity press, the International Biographical Centre, goes as far as offering diplomas in the categories of “Man of the Year,” “Living Legend,” “Outstanding Intellectual,” etc.<sup>5</sup>

When I Googled the term “vanity press,” I got 5,520,000 results. The phrase “vanity press” was coined in 1959. Vanity publishers are also called joint venture publishers, cooperative publishers, subsidy publishers, shared responsibility publishers, and, more sharply, unethical publishers.<sup>6</sup> Commercial publishers sell books to the public, whereas vanity ones sell books to authors (and, unfortunately, most authors will not recover their initial investment). Vanity publishers have small or nonexistent distribution networks so the book’s author generally becomes the distributor, too. Because vanity publishers edit and print the book, they do not fall into the category of “self-publishing.” In self-publishing, the author does everything except for the printing and binding (the Encore program from Amazon is a popular example). Self-publishing and vanity printing have been facilitated by the Internet and print-on-demand (POD) availability. Setting up a Web page costs nearly nothing, and POD services found on the Internet require little or no upfront investment. An added benefit for the vain author is the fact that most POD products cannot be returned.

Because many scientific publications are now asking authors to pay to publish their articles, the line between academic and vanity publishing is slightly blurry. Even if you pay for publication, the vehicle carrying your scientific publication should have an editorial board and a peer-review process to maintain its academic credibility. When selecting materials, many libraries do not make a distinction between vanity and other publications.<sup>7</sup> It is, however, important to distinguish POD from vanity printing in other ways. POD is a service

generally provided to the reader as much as it is to the author. It is important to keep in mind that just because a book failed to gain attention from a large publisher does not mean it is bad; it only means that the publisher thought it would not make the company enough money. POD services such as the one the *American Journal of Neuroradiology* uses for its *Special Collection* series share nothing with vanity publishing. Vanity and scientific POD publishing may use the same digital printing techniques, but that is about it.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, vanity and self-publishing were popular and had a better reputation than they do today. Renowned authors such as Carroll, Twain, Poe, Kipling, and Thoreau self-published some of their books. Vantage Press (founded in 1949) and Dorrance Publishing (founded in 1920) are 2 of the best-known vanity publishers. Although their current Web sites clearly reveal their pay-for-service nature, it seems that not all authors are happy with this.<sup>8,9</sup> Vantage Press was found guilty in a massive class-action suit by authors who complained the services offered in their contracts had not been honored.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, vanity publishers continue to proliferate and are becoming on-line-only or combined electronic/print enterprises.

A well-known one is Xlibris. Xlibris charges nothing for its basic program but demands a fee for services such as editing and galley proofs. Its CEO recently stated that the company will turn a profit even if does not sell a single book.<sup>11</sup> This has not escaped the attention of venture capitalists, and Xlibris is now partly owned by Random House and others, while Barnes and Noble and Time Warner have started similar operations. The Xlibris catalogue lists a whooping 25,000 books from 20,000 authors!<sup>12</sup> Barnes and Noble's company, MightyWords, did poorly and closed in 2001. Another called iPublish is dedicated to electronic-only publishing.<sup>13</sup> It is said that some of these companies make a profit by selling as little as 5 copies of a book.<sup>14</sup>

As the number of readers in the United States has progressively decreased (last year 40% read 1 book or less), the number of would-be authors has increased nearly 25% in a 1-year period according to the previously cited *New York Times* article.<sup>14</sup> Vanity companies claim their publishing constitutes the democratization of literature. While in the past writing was the domain of a small elite, now anyone can write and publish a book. For as little as \$3, one can upload a book onto a vanity Web site that uses POD and sell it via the giant on-line retailers. Because cost decreases as the size of the print run increases, traditional publishers must print and sell thousands of books to recuperate their investment and be able to offer the books at

a reasonable price. This is not the case with vanity presses that use POD.

During the recent economic meltdown, popular books geared to entertainment showed significantly lower sales, while specialized niche books continued selling well, a fact stressed by the vanity media. Vanity companies also will tell you self-publishing may lead to being noticed by literary agents and it gives you an opportunity to sell your book to one of the major publishing houses (similar to posting a movie on YouTube and then getting an offer from a major Hollywood studio). Some individuals argue that vanity publishing serves smaller disciplines well, such as poetry, where getting published and recognized is very difficult. When governments impose censorship, vanity printing may help promote resistance and distribute ideas. The most famous example of this was the Soviet "Samizdat" movement during the Communist era. At that time, Bukovsky said, "I myself create it, edit it, censor it, publish it, distribute it, and get imprisoned for it."<sup>15</sup>

To me, vanity printing falls into the same category as vanity plates for your car or vanity telephone numbers. I cannot imagine telling someone to call me at 1-800-CAS-TILLO or driving around in a car tagged EIC-AJNR. There are many things that make you feel cool, but vanity publishing shouldn't be one of them.

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